

# The Golden Eagle: An Interview With Artist-Poet Munio Makuuchi

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Artist-poet Howard T. Makuuchi, who prefers being called by his adopted first name “Munio,” is acknowledged by his contemporaries as one of America’s premier drypoint intaglio printmakers. Amy Ling, editor of the anthology *Creating Asian America*, has described Munio as an “original, a survivor, and a valuable verbal/visual Asian American artist.” Since the 1960s, Munio’s prints have traveled extensively as a part of numerous exhibitions across the country, including the Portland Art Museum International Print Exhibition earlier this year.

Despite these accomplishments, Munio has remained one of the Northwest’s best-kept secrets. But that is changing. At age sixty-two, Munio has come into his own, enjoying critical acclaim and increased exposure of his poetry, prints, and Aerogami (“flying origami”). This October, Munio’s printmaking and Aerogami creations will be included in the exhibit “Reading, Writing, and Paper” at the VSA (Very Special Arts) Gallery in Washington, D.C. Munio’s success can be attributed in part to his longevity as an artist as well as to the historical and aesthetic value of his work. Over the years, the press and public have come to appreciate his art as not only socially relevant and timely, but timeless as well.

An impressive sampling of Munio’s art and poetry can be found in his book *From Lake Minidoka to Lake Mendota—And Back to the Northwest Sea* (T. Makunouchi Press, 1994). This 248 page collection of poems and prints is part social commentary and part autobiography, expressed with both wit and insight.

The work contained in *Lake Minidoka* is in many ways a meditation on Munio’s experiences as a third-generation Japanese-American (sansei). From age seven to eleven, Munio was, in his words, a “child prisoner of war” at the Japanese internment camp in Minidoka, Idaho during World War Two. After high school, Munio pursued degrees in Art Education (University of Colorado), Etching (University of Iowa), and Painting (University of Wisconsin) while

honing his skills as a master of drypoint intaglio printmaking. In 1978, Munio moved to Nigeria, where he taught art classes for seven years at the University of Ife. Not surprisingly, *Lake Minidoka* addresses such issues as racial self-identity and the Japanese internment: In both his prints and his poetry, Munio finds a measure of harmony within the discord of race relations, ideas inspired by his life in the United States and Africa.

Though Munio's artistic approach varies in terms of theme and purpose, the interplay between his printmaking and poetry stands out. Munio's prints are textured and somewhat ambiguous, while his poems resemble liner notes, filling in the light and dark aspects of his prints with a revealing phrase, stanza, or title. Munio characterizes this relationship as a "verbal-visual incorporation," one that enhances the meaning of both forms.

Last April, Munio Makuuchi and I met over coffee in Seattle's International District to talk about his art. Over the course of two hours we discussed a number of topics, including Munio's time at Minidoka and specific themes in his work. What follows is an excerpt of our conversation.

**AI:** How would you describe the four years you spent at Minidoka?

**MM:** Well, the camp cracked my heart. At age seven I tried to drown myself. It's a kind of guilt by osmosis: I took on the sadness and depression and whatever of being there.

My first artistic act occurred on the train [to the camp]. It was my sort of protest as I look back—my freedom to see. I took the prerogative of tearing open the duct tape and peering out. It was a federal or military offense to do so.

**AI:** You mentioned certain things happened that were not generally publicized or spoken about by historians.

**MM:** Or even among ourselves, yes. One time my sis overheard Mom tell someone that we couldn't go to the bathrooms until after 10:30 in the morning because [the camp supervisors] had to take out the hanging bodies [suicides].

I had blanked that memory out until my sister brought it up, yet I have always wanted to do a print of people hanging, holding hands. I think there were more suicides than were allowed to be known.

**AI:** What lasting memories did your experiences at camp leave you with?

**MM:** Words of endurance: "Shikata ga nai." Silence, the samurai code of silence. These things had an effect.



[Munio reads the poem aloud:]

### **Shikata Ga Nai**

(It can't be helped, endure)

Women, the shadow of camps  
hung in your eyes  
with the tears of migration.

*Shikata ga nai,*  
*Shikata ga nai,*  
Those railroad sounds  
of sage bush deserts.

The landscape  
Turning like blinded trains,  
Past the dust of camps,  
Tar paper shelters  
In a desert of coyotes, owls, magpies,  
scorpions, jackrabbits, rattlers  
That wander around the settling pond,  
My rafting place.

*Shikata ga nai,*  
Those railroad sounds  
Of sage bush deserts.

*Shikata ga nai,*  
*Shikata ga nai,*

*Shikata ga nai,*  
*Shikata ga nai,*

*Shikata ga nai,*  
*Shikata ga nai.*

**AI:** “Shikata Ga Nai” is one of the more moving poems in your manuscript. The repetition of the poem’s title suggests life at Minidoka was regimented and oppressive, even mundane.

**MM:** The nitty-gritty of sand and dust. There’s a certain kind of endurance just hanging on for the day of freedom, right?—when the

desert spring flowers blossom.

**AI:** How do you approach the creative process?

**MM:** I try to be multi-faceted. I'm looking for strong, distilled images. I'm on a power trip in some ways, an expressive trip, yet I'm seeking a silent center. There's sometimes humor, sometimes wit, sometimes bite. Even the title, *Lake Minidoka*... there was no such thing as a lake in Minidoka.

**AI:** You make it sound like a child's summer camp.

**MM:** You know what the lake was? It was a shit settling pond and that was my lake. I used to raft in it. I used to go ice skating. In my poem, "Lake Minidoka," I speak of falling through the ice and emerging as Godzilla, immune to everything, where the sweetest of melons grow with a taint I shan't forget.

**AI:** You address issues of camp life and self-identity more directly in your poetry, while your prints tend to be less delineated and more evocative.

**MM:** It's a verbal-visual incorporation.

**AI:** What is the title of this print? [See illustration.]

**MM:** *A Jackrabbit Sitting Under the Window At Night, Listening for Pillow Talks of Escape.*

**AI:** It's a striking, somewhat haunting visual metaphor for a scared boy, crouching behind one of the refitted housing units at camp. Is that what you had in mind?

**MM:** Sort of.... Originally, I based [the print] on images that were vivid in my mind of looking out of my window and seeing jackrabbits in the moonlight. These were images out of the night, out of the dark. A little later on I wrote a poem that suggests an underplay between the two, though my art and poetry can certainly be appreciated on their own merits.

### **J.Rabbit Run**

"Whistle Stop" a running jackrabbit—

Run! Baby! Run!

Or it's lead in the head!

Don't stop "japrabbit" or they'll  
relocate you... (again)

Double time

Hubba! Hubba!

Tuck those ears low

Run inland, ho!





*A Jackrabbit Sitting Under the Window at Night, Listening for Pillow Talks of Escape* by Munio Makuuchi, drypoint intaglio (circa 1986), 12" by 15". Photo by Joe LaVigne.



*Untitled* by Munio Makuuchi, drypoint intaglio  
(1988), 23" by 30". Photo by Joe LaVigne.



**AI:** What I like about *Untitled* and many of your other prints is their multi-dimensional quality. You can view them as is, but you can also turn them on their side or rotate them in some way to gain another perspective.

**MM:** Some you can turn upside down and there's another composition going on. You'd be amazed what you see upside down. There are ghost images and spirits underlying the more obvious images. If you look closely at the bottom of *Untitled*, you'll see the outline of a baby's features.

**AI:** It's almost like *Where's Waldo*, isn't it?

**MM:** I enjoy doing that. I have this "When something is too hard, I soften it, and when it's too soft, I harden it" sort of attitude. Kissy kissy bang bang, I call it. I like the idea of images slipping into other images. It's a technique I play with.

In *Untitled*, there's a quiet area and there's an active area, and in a sense I was aware of trying to balance East and West. As I look back I realize I identify with Chinese one-corner painting. There are quiet areas, an Asian sort of quietness, and a kind of Western activity in one corner. It is such a balanced piece that I keep going back to it; my printmaking sometimes gets too busy.

**AI:** What is the emotional core of *Untitled*? What ideas were you trying to communicate?

**MM:** The silence of sleep which we dream every night. It's the sleep of life and death, of age and youth, between my grandma and my son. There are sweet silences and the trauma of demons lurking in our day and nightmares.

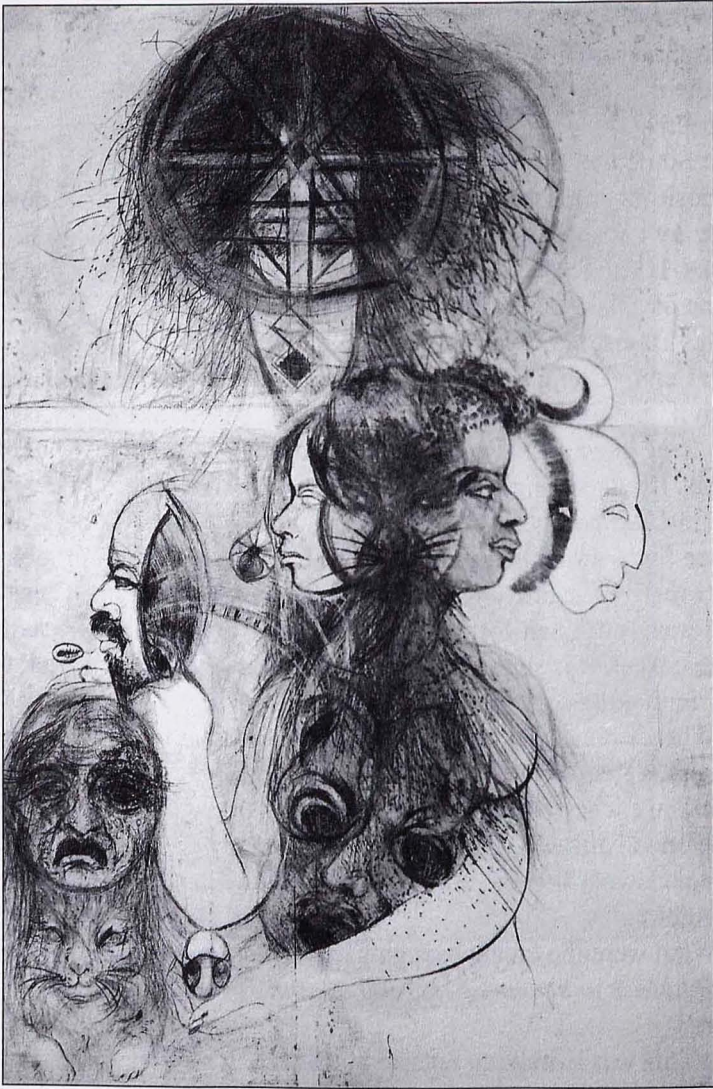
**AI:** What were the creative origins of *We and the Gods Wear a Sybil-Zoidal Mask to be Ourselves, and Behind Them, Ancestors Demand Voices*?

**MM:** This was a drawing I started in Africa. It's a play of masks. There's a black woman wearing a mask of a white person, and a white woman wearing a mask of my dad. In the woman's breast area there is a mask of chaos and disorder.

At the top there is a mask of insanity, and in the mask I have all of the symbols of the major world religions. To me belief is the dirtiest word in the dictionary because so much blood has been shed in the name of belief.

**AI:** *Tears Under a Southern Cross* is darker than some of your other work. Can you describe the different elements of this print?

**MM:** In this print there's a mixed-blood woman and a bird of paradise trying to restrain a milk snake, which is sucking on the



*We and the Gods Wear a Sybil- 'Zoidal Mask to be Ourselves, and Behind Them, Ancestors Demand Voices*  
by Munio Makuuchi, drypoint intaglio (1986),  
approximately 20" by 29". Photo by Joe LaVigne.





*Tears Under a Southern Cross* by Munio Makuuchi,  
drypoint intaglio (1986), 23" by 29". Photo by Joe  
LaVigne.

woman's breast. At the same time there are eggs balanced precariously on her head. The woman represents the hard color coding of South Africa.

The mask below her is divided into the four racial colors, and to the left there is a pregnant woman carrying the different racial babies of the world. I depicted the man with a Semitic profile viewed from the side, while full faced he becomes a black Jesus. *Tears Under a Southern Cross* is South America and South Africa.

### South Africa

Homeland of the homeless  
Color coded rigid rainbow that doesn't bend Africa  
A strong experience imbued with the energy of their  
powerful sun  
A hot basic bittersweet chocolate  
that flavors the roof of the mouth  
And anything thereafter  
Yet with the complexity of a drum beat  
Goes on sweating the heart

**AI:** What frustrates you as an artist?

**MM:** As an Asian-American artist I've been told there's too much ego involved [in my work], which is too bad. I don't want it to be that egocentric. The Asian mindset isn't totally accepting of what I'm doing.

Sometimes I wonder if Asians intuitively realize that we have a lot to offer; we don't want to panic the white world, so we keep kind of quiet.

**AI:** Do not disturb.

**MM:** In Asian society the worst thing you can do is disturb someone's peace of mind.

In one of my poems where I speak of chaos it's interesting to note that the Greeks had it right; the stem word for chaos and creativity is the same. I think art can be influenced by religious or sexual ideas, but you can overdose. You have to be careful—you have to be motivated by issues but use that energy to create something



beyond your own experiences, something higher, something universal.

Even for me to story-tell camp issues—at the same time I’m in it but I want to be out of it. I want to free people from their own cramped camps through my art and writing. My attitude is that I’ll communicate in any way and in any fashion I can—writing, visual, performing, whatever.

### **The Golden Eagle**

Is my spirit bird  
From the Valley of the Golden Eagle  
In the Snake River Canyons  
near our “campgrounds”?  
With the Golden Eagle  
I soar from the incense smoke  
Uplifted by the tar shelters’ red  
Glowing pot-bellied stoves  
of cold bitter winters  
further  
higher  
and with  
silent grace—

“Shikata Ga Nai,” “J.Rabbit Run,” “South Africa,” and “The Golden Eagle”  
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of Munio’s prints and poetry, visit his web page at <[www.virtual-cafe.com/munio](http://www.virtual-cafe.com/munio)>.